

'Foundling' rekindles the familiar fires
Mike Taylor, Calaveras Enterprise

I'm not much for sentimental treacle during the holidays; after a while all the tissue grabbing feels strenuous and the dabbing at the tear ducts gets monotonous. That's why I was almost dreading the revival of "The Christmas Foundling" at the Fallon House Theatre; I didn't want to relive the tender tale of an orphan raised by prospectors outside Gold Rush-era Columbia any more than I want to see "It's a Wonderful Life" again. My Scrooge-like notions put to rest, last Saturday's matinee performance left me feeling all warm and gooey inside just like it did the first time I saw it.

If anything was new about the show, it was some added musicality, presumably placed by first-time director Julie Ludlum to add some levity, but the rest of the tale felt as comfortable as a roaring fire on a snowy winter's night. Everything about this show, and dagnabit I mean everything, made the audience feel good, special and under a captivating old-fashioned spell.

From Dennis Jones' simple miner's cabin in the woods (the whole theater smells of cedar and pine needles and the woods) to Joanna Hobbs' impeccable lighting, once you enter the space, it's back to those rough-and-tumble days when a prospector could labor for weeks to earn a pittance. It's a simple life, one in which the addition of anything to break the monotony might stir the populous.

That's what happens one Christmas Eve to Old Jake and Hoke, partners who share a claim and forge an existence in Piney Creek. A woman collapses into Hoke's arms as the lights dim; a baby cries; lives are altered forever.

Ty Smith narrates the show as Old Jake, sharing brief introductions to some scenes as the lad grows up in the foothills. It's as if this role was written for Smith; considering the Sierra Repertory Theatre Company commissioned the Norman Allen play, perhaps that's the case. He gets to hoot and holler with the other miners, and then soften his impeccable voice to a shadow, one that can send chills and inspire a lump in the throat.

As Hoke, Gary Holman gets as far from the sheriff in "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" as you could imagine. Hoke's the strong, silent type, and as he's charged with caring for the boy, his best qualities surge to the fore. Holman's face regularly conveys just what Hoke is feeling without making him appear transparent or disingenuous. Later, after a delicate yet stirring scene with Aunt Sarah (Lauren Barnett, who's wonderful as the woman searching for her sister, the boy's mother), the lights fade slowly, leaving a dim spot hovering - for just a microsecond - on Holman's grippingly emotional face. It's brilliant.

Douglas G. Brennan brings some sensitive humor as Moscow. His scene with the boy, discussing Christmas at home in Mother Russia, wrenches for all the right reasons.

Greg Parker shines again as Boston (are you seeing the pattern with these characters?), a slightly irreverent rascal who probably grows the

most after the boy is born. Rob Smittle is also good as Georgia, another rascal, but one who's always conscious that there's a child about when the boys visit Hoke and Jake.

Sullivan Noble plays the boy, Tom, perfectly. As a seventh-grader, it's remarkable to see him wait for lines without looking like he's waiting for lines. He's tender when Tom's departure with Sarah comes and he says goodbye to Hoke; he's a wily kidder with Jake, cajoling stories out of the elder miner.

I admit it, I was wrong to arrive at a theater thinking I knew what was in store for me; but I'm totally willing to give credit to Ludlum and her cast. This show is perfect for today's tougher financial times. It's warm, gentle and filled with subtle humor.

I had completely forgotten how emotional the story is, how its message of family - no matter how it's comprised - reminds us of what the holidays are all about.

It's a wonderful life.